Greg Lasley's Web Site

How to Document Rare Birds

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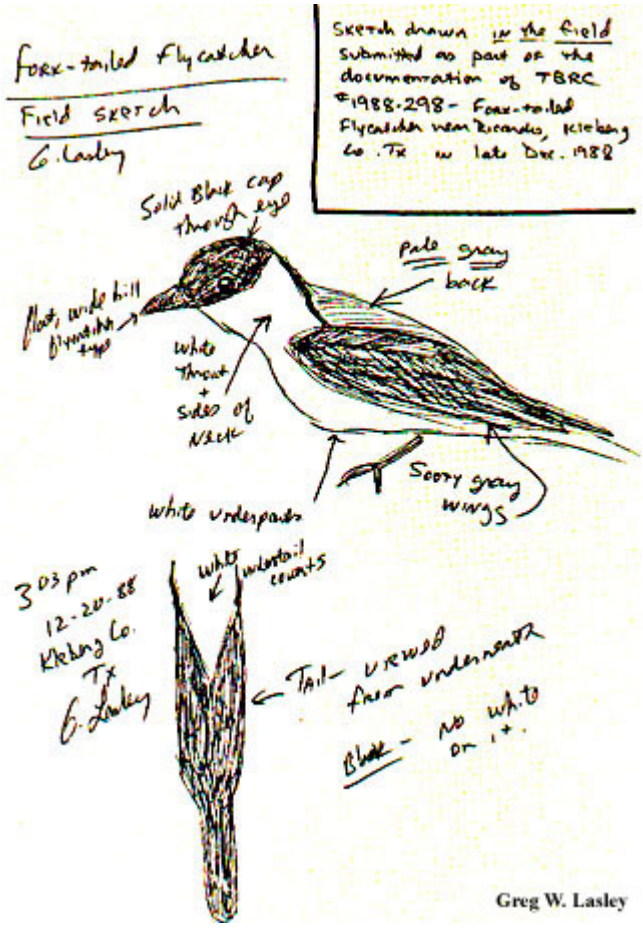
We've all been there. You are a relatively new birder, and you have found a good bird; now somebody wants you to prepare documentation on it. "Why," you think, "that seems silly." It was obvious what the bird was. In my case that moment came on my first Christmas Bird Count (CBC) many years ago in Austin, Texas. I found a Merlin! It was my lifer and certainly not a bird I had expected to see. It had not been recorded before on an Austin CBC. At the compilation dinner the compiler read down the list of birds, and we all responded "yes" if we had seen that species. After the main list was read, I proudly announced "my" special bird. I can still remember the chill that ran down my spine when the compiler looked at me over the top of his glasses and said that dreaded word I had heard about: "details." Would I survive? Well, I did



survive and eventually looked forward to the opportunity to prepare documentation on rarities. It gave some scientific credibility to my bird-watching, and I felt I was making a contribution. --G. W. LASLEY

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Sketches are helpful to rare-bird documentation. Even the crudest of drawings by individuals professing little or no artistic abilities can later be an integral part of the record. This Fork-tailed Flycatcher (*Tyrannus savana*) was seen at Ricardo, Kleberg County, Texas, in late December 1988.

Birders often find themselves "put on the spot" to produce details for rare species observed. Those unfamiliar with the concept of producing written details or providing documentation of a sighting may feel somewhat persecuted when informed that their "say-so" is not good enough to make a record legitimate. The initial enthusiasm and excitement of finding and reporting a good bird can quickly turn to disappointment, discouragement, and depression when their undocumented record is treated with skepticism by the local or regional "experts." Unfortunately, this treatment is something that most of us have had to endure during developmental stages of our bird-watching skills. Many birders understand the importance of taking field notes and documenting rarities but may only rarely or irregularly practice such good habits because they find it tedious, it requires "work" that takes the fun out of their hobby, they are too busy to "get around to it," they assume that someone else will do it, or they just are not sure what is needed or how to write up such details.

At some point, all birders have probably been guilty of observing a rarity for which they have never written notes or supplied any documentation. Many undoubtedly valid records have not been documented beyond mention in the local newsletter or American Birds, if the record even made it that far. Numerous historical sight-records, especially those prior to the mid-197Os, are missing supporting details. Many others are supported by details gleaned from observers' rusty memories decades after the observation. Although the recent trend is toward more and better documentation, some birders are still not recording information on their sightings beyond keeping simple lists of species and numbers. This omission is unfortunate because each observation of an unusual bird could become an important contribution to the ornithological record; unsupported "hearsay" records (e.g., "tick marks" on checklists) must remain hypothetical or be ignored. If observers make no effort to document unusual birds, then they should not be surprised if these records fail to gain acceptance or be published.

Birders now generate many of today's data on species' distributions and field-identification aspects of North American ornithology. Most professional ornithologists recognize that the large volume of data generated by birders, especially that involving extralimital records, cannot and should not be ignored just because most of it is not based on specimen evidence. There has been considerable debate, however, over what sorts of other documentation are acceptable. In recent years, rare-bird committees (RBCs) have been formed in most states, provinces, and

many foreign countries (Roberson 1990) to help bridge the gap between specimen and non-specimen records. RBCs are composed of experienced amateur and professional ornithologists. The RBC process includes acquisition and protection of rare-bird documentation, evaluation by a panel of knowledgeable peers, and publication of proceedings. Many RBCs that must limit the volume of records they receive (or be overwhelmed) compile a review list. Review lists typically contain species that average only a few occurrences annually, representing the rarest of the rare species. Documentation for "lesser" rarities may be requested by some RBCs, as well as by regional ornithological societies and bird clubs, American Birds regional editors, and Christmas Bird Count compilers. Although a particular species may not be on its respective state or provincial review list, records pertaining to unusual seasonal occurrences (e.g., early or late migrants, unusual summer or winter records) may also require documentation for evaluation and subsequent acceptance.

Preparing for Field Observations

Written documentation provides the foundation for non-specimen records, including those well-supported by photographs or tape recordings. These data are best gathered during the observation and are generally referred to as field notes (see Remsen 1977). Field notes should be written in the field during or immediately following the observation. Many birders opt to concentrate on observing and studying the rarity as long as possible and then write notes immediately after the observation. Although this approach has its advantages, especially if the bird is being difficult to observe or does not linger, there is always the possibility that some identification characters may be overlooked. Unless the bird loiters for subsequent observation, there is little possibility of retrieving overlooked information. The likelihood of overlooking features is lessened if you scribble down notes during the observation, thus forcing yourself to look at the bird in more detail, rather than just observing basic identification features.

Field notes do not have to be neatly printed; information scribbled on a paper towel is preferable to nothing at all. These notes, no matter how messy or soiled with mud, sweat, or food, constitute your original data, and, therefore, should be saved whether or not the information is later transcribed to a separate notebook or directly to a more formalized report (e.g., for submission to a RBC). Scribbled notes on small, easily misplaced scraps of paper should be transcribed as quickly as possible to prevent possible loss, and radically abbreviated notes should be rewritten while information not recorded on paper can still be retrieved from memory. No matter how good your memory, the more time that elapses between the observation and recording the information, the more "fuzzy" or biased the details can become, if not forgotten altogether. Most birders would probably be amazed at their poor recall of plumage patterns and fine detail. For example, can you describe from memory the plumage details of some of the most common species (e.g., American Kestrel, Acorn Woodpecker, or Blue Jay)? For most of us, this revealing exercise can reinforce the importance of writing notes instead of "chancing it to memory." A micro-cassette recorder is an alternative to written notes. Some observers find it convenient to carry a recorder in a pocket. In the event that a rarity is found, it is a simple matter to record your notes. A voice-activated model worn around the neck keeps hands free to maneuver binoculars or camera. The recorded information can later be transcribed verbatim for your files and for submission to appropriate sources. The tape represents your original data and should be saved, if possible.

In an ideal situation, field notes should be written before reference to the trusty field guide or similar sources of information (including other birders) because influence from these sources can bias your description by (1) channeling your description into describing "field marks" instead of describing the whole bird; (2) helping fill in details that you may have overlooked or not been able to see; and (3) predisposing you toward seeing what ought to be seen based on your identification (regardless of whether or not the bird was correctly identified in the first place!). Realistically, however, field guides and birding companions help form the basis for many identifications. In fact, many outstanding birds probably would not be reported if the observer did not have access to a guide to confirm the identification. Nonetheless, the description of the bird must be written from observations of the bird, not from the field guide or other sources. If field guides are consulted during the observation, describe how the bird varies, detail by detail, and cite the reference.

Every beginning birder has probably experienced the disappointment of studying a new bird, only to turn to the field guide later and realize that an important feature was inadvertently overlooked. Most field guides possess a labeled figure of a bird, illustrating the general external morphology or "topography." It is a good idea to become familiar with the general plumage terminology of a bird in order to know what "parts" to look for and where they are located (e.g., supercilium, lesser wing-coverts, nape). If you do not carry your field guide into the field, it may be helpful to make a copy of one of these topographies to slip into your field notebook. The picture will prompt you as to what parts to study. During the observation, record what each part looked like. It is also a good idea to organize your observations, developing a routine that will help you to describe the entire bird in detail and also to avoid the possibility of missing critical features. Practice on common species. Not only will that help to prepare you for describing rarities later, but it is also a good way to really learn and appreciate your backyard birds.

In addition to the record of the bird's appearance, additional information surrounding the observation is necessary to provide complete documentation (who, where, when, and how). Many states and provinces provide an "official" form for the submission of data for review-list species. These forms cue the observer to what additional information is required (Louisiana Bird Records Committee Form (note). This form is designed to facilitate recording and retrieving information. On some forms the description section is further broken into sub-sections (e.g., colors of eyes, legs, wings) to help, theoretically, cue the observer as to what information is needed. Although helpful in that context, these forms tend to constrain the description to brief responses and tempt observers to fill in information that may not have been seen. Of all the information requested, the description is most crucial. The description should be thorough, describing as much as was observed, and should include the bird's size, shape, plumage characteristics, and soft-part colors (e.g., eyes, legs, all facial and other bare skin, bill). It should be organized in a logical manner --start with the head; then move to the back, wings, and tail before covering the chin, throat, breast, belly, and undertail coverts; finish with the soft parts, behavior, and vocalizations (if any). This will make it easier for the person reading your description to make sense of your write-up. The description should include comparisons, direct and indirect, to adjacent birds and/or similar species, noting structural and plumage characteristics that are similar or different. The description should be unambiguous, leaving nothing to assumption.

Sketches are helpful in making sure that no part of the bird's external anatomy is overlooked (sketch on beginning of article and Figure 1). Even the crudest of drawings (e.g., "stick bird") by individuals professing absolutely no artistic abilities can later be an integral part of the documentation. "Stick birds" are preferable to more elaborate drawings based on (and probably biased by) memory and field-guide illustrations or photographs. Use of generic bird illustrations (Figure 2), especially helpful to beginning birders, can provide features to "fill in." Homemade versions are easy to make. Using a field-guide illustration as a template, trace only the outline from an assortment of generic birds (e.g., warbler, sparrow, Buteo, hummingbird). Make several copies to take into the field, but remember to note how the bird differs from the generic bird, if it does not exactly match (e.g., "the bill was thicker; the tail was shorter") and illustrate the differences if possible. Like field notes, field sketches should be drawn in the field; they represent original data, and should be retained in personal files. More elaborate illustrations made after the observation or those based on the field sketches should always be indicated as such. Sketches are also helpful in reinforcing certain aspects of written descriptions (such as shapes) that are often difficult to describe, but sketches usually cannot substitute for photos or serve as the sole source of what the bird looked like.

Look Beyond Field Marks

Peterson's (1954) A Field Guide to the Birds introduced his concept of the "field mark" and changed the way birders look at birds. Today, field identification is still based on this principle. A tanager with a white wing-bar, for example, is a Western, a bunting with pale wing-bars is a Lazuli (Peterson 1990). Simple? Well, unfortunately these field marks may not always be diagnostic. Many birders do not look for details in addition to "definitive" characters and fail to observe many of the less obvious details that are visible and may be just as important for identification. Critical identification features (= field marks) should be emphasized, but exhaustive detail is always preferable to a condensed, skeletal description. Detailed information that can be noted during field observations includes intricacies of plumage pattern, coloration, and general body size and proportions (any of which may be indicative of age or sex, or hint at geographic origin); condition of plumage (e.g., obvious molt or stage of plumage wear); general health (e.g., active versus sluggish due to injury or some type of illness); breeding condition (coloration of soft parts); and any other peculiarities of the individual bird. The Birds of the Western Palearctic series (Cramp and Simmons 1977ff) is a good source for examples of detailed plumage descriptions. Shorebirds: An Identification Guide (Hayman et al. 1986) and Identification Guide to North American Passerines (Pyle et al. 1987) illustrate molt sequences, feather patterns, and wear.

Size is an important feature to study and attempt to estimate. A bird's size can involve a series of different measurements: total length bill to tail), height (head to toe), wing span, and body mass. Field guides typically use linear measurements obtained from museum study-skins. These measurements provide only a rough estimate of the bird's total length. A bird can greatly alter its apparent size by changing posture. Think of a Great Blue Heron (Ardea herodias) roosting with its neck tucked close to its body versus a feeding bird with its neck in an "S" versus a very alert heron with its neck nearly straight. In this case a bill-to-toe measurement could vary nearly three feet. Although field guides give bird dimensions in inches, it is generally best to use comparisons when reporting a bird's size. Use other nearby species of known size as a

measuring stick (e.g., "slightly smaller than adjacent Red Knots"), for instance, rather than coming up with an estimate of 10 1/2 inches without elaborating on how you arrived at that number. Size can be very deceiving in the absence of a size standard (i.e., size standard = another species or object of known dimensions); even experienced birders can have difficulty. There is considerable potential for misidentifications when size forms the basis of the identification, and great care should be exercised.

Size nevertheless can be determined fairly accurately from a photograph of a bird next to some object that can be measured. Louisiana's first Great Black backed Gull (Larus mariyius, LBRC no.82-5) was photographed on a pier piling (Figure 3). To determine the size of the gull, one of the observers subsequently swam out to the piling and measured its diameter. This allowed a fairly exact calculation of the bird's size to confirm identification. A more precise measurement was that obtained for the first record of Green Violet-ear (Colibri thalassinus) from Arkansas. The bird was photographed at a hummingbird feeder (American Birds 1986, 40:128). The bird's bill length was obtained by measuring a plastic "flower" on the feeder and then extrapolating to determine a value for the bill. The measurement was able to clinch the identification of Green Violet-ear, separating it from the very similar, but distinctly larger, Sparkling Violet-ear (C. coruscans).

A bird's behavior may yield information critical to its identification: postures (e.g., feeding, sleeping, flight silhouettes, etc.), foraging behavior, body movements (e.g., tail-wagging, wing-flicking, flight behavior), and voice. Feeding behavior, foraging maneuvers and substrates, and habitat provide information to aid in identification. For instance, the foraging behavior of the Worm-eating Warbler (Helmitheros vermivorus) is distinctive. This species spends a majority of its foraging time searching and probing into clumps of dead leaves that are suspended in living foliage. Do not limit your observations of bird behavior only to anticipated field marks. To note that a waterthrush was wagging its tail without actually describing how it was wagging its tail (e.g., up and down, side to side), for example, omits behavioral information that might have helped to identify the waterthrush to species. Try to note exactly what a bird is doing throughout the observation; even its lack of activity (e.g., sleeping, resting) may be interesting if details on posture and shape are noted.

Vocalizations are critical to the identification of many species. Although songs and calls of birds are often very difficult to render into human sounds or words, an attempt should be made to elaborate on the sounds that a bird produces (e.g., pics, tweets, chirps, etc.). Avoid the temptation to simply say that the call was "typical of the species" (e.g., "typical flight note of a Red-throated Pipit") without further elaboration, and avoid using the patent "field guide" renditions (e.g., whip-poor-will) without some of your own interpretation of the tonal qualities. Whip-poor-will, for example, is an over-simplification of the true sound produced by the Whip-poor-will (Caprimulgus vociferus), and populations in eastern and western portions of the species' range sound different. Individual variation can also be noted in vocalizations; those familiar with a species' vocalizations should elaborate on how the vocalization compared to that which they interpret as "typical." Every birder interprets bird vocalizations in a slightly different way. A good exercise to improve interpretation of bird sounds is to listen to common species and then to evaluate and write personal descriptions of their vocalizations.

Color descriptions can often be confusing. Many ornithologists use Color Standards and Nomenclature (Ridgway 1912) to evaluate and describe the coloration of plumage and soft parts. Most birders do not have access to this guide, but other guides are available. Naturalist's Color Guide (Smithe 1975), based on Ridgway 1912), contains eighty-six color swatches to identify a broad range of colors; Naturalist's Color Guide Supplement (Smithe 1974) discusses color terminology and analyzes and sorts colors into "families." Color guides are of limited field use because it is difficult to get side-by-side comparisons of the bird and the color swatches but are helpful in providing a rough guide to the basic colors and their proper names. Another approach, which eliminates some of the ambiguity caused by the improper use of color names, is to compare directly the bird colors in question to colors of adjacent species (e.g., the mantle shade of a particular gull compared to other gulls and terns standing in a mixed-species flock). In the absence of direct comparisons, use a comparison based on a species familiar to you (e.g., "the color buff, like that of the breast of a Buff-breasted Sandpiper").

Cameras and Tape Recorders for the Field

Photographs

Photographs provide the best means for birders to provide tangible proof of a bird's occurrence. You need not be a professional photographer to take recognizable pictures of a bird, nor do photos have to be of publication quality to serve as documentation. Even distant, blurry, or poorly exposed images may be useful in identifying a bird or providing support that the identification was correct. Many such examples have been published in American Birds (see also Roberson 1980).

It can be challenging to take photographs and notes at the same time, but on many occasions a cooperative bird will allow you the time to do so. Even when photographs are available, a written description of a rarity is desirable. It is important to make the effort whenever possible (remember the option of the voice-activated recorder.) If possible (bird and film permitting), take a series of photographs that show the bird in a variety of poses and lighting conditions. Do not assume that any one picture you take will be successfully developed, be in focus, and show all the critical marks. Similarly, do not assume that only one photograph of your series will support species identification, especially of cryptic species (e.g., Empidonax, stints). The first U.S. record of Greenish Elaenia (Myiopagis viridicata), for example, was initially rejected by the AOU Checklist Committee (AOU 1987) because the only slides submitted as supporting documentation did not show the critical identification features. Only after all the photos were submitted could obscure plumage characters be confirmed (AOU 1989). In some cases (e.g., some wood pewees, Empidonax, gulls, etc.), even well-photographed individuals may never be conclusively identified, but then, even some specimens of these traditionally confusing groups remain unidentified. With some effort, it is possible to get reasonable photographs of most rarities (see LaFrance 1989, Milosevich 1989, and Augustine 1991). It is especially important that if you do not own a camera or you do not have the camera with you when you see a rarity, then you should make every effort to go back later or encourage others to try to obtain photographs. Try to obtain photographs of any unusual species, not just ultra-rarities.

Tape Recordings

Tape recording is another means of obtaining irrefutable documentation of a species' occurrence. The songs and calls of many species are unique. Regardless of the recording equipment you choose, before you begin to tape the bird, first record some brief information on the tape itself (e.g., "8 October 1999, Garner Ridge, Cameron Parish, Louisiana, 8 AM, call notes of Couch's Kingbird").

Opportunities for obtaining sound documentation of rarities occur less frequently, but it does not hurt to be prepared (see Gulledge 1977). Prohibitively expensive high-quality recording equipment is not a prerequisite for obtaining identifiable recordings. Inexpensive cassette recorders are adequate for this purpose. Crude recordings made with a mini-cassette recorder can frequently be adequate in providing tangible evidence of a bird's occurrence. The first (and currently only) record of Antillean Nighthawk (Chordeiles gundlachii) from Louisiana is based on a sound recording made on a cassette recorder (Schulenberg 1988), and a rare Northern Saw-whet Owl (Aegolius acadicus) in western Texas was recently confirmed with a recording on a small pocket recorder with a built-in microphone (Lasley 1991). It should be noted that mini-cassette recorders typically record at a tape speed of 15/16 inch per second, not an accepted recording standard. Moreover, very few mini-cassette recorders actually run at this speed; often speed wanders within each unit. Designed for use with human voice, these recorders have poor; if any, frequency response over 3000 to 4000 Hz. Sharp, high-frequency call notes and songs, such as those of the Blackpoll Warbler (Dendroica striata), will not be reproduced faithfully, if at all.

Despite the observer's concern for quality, an attempt to record should be made. Be prepared to send your mini-cassette and recorder to a sound archive. (Your recorder will be returned.) Playing back the recording on the original mini-cassette recorder is the only way to be reasonably certain of making an accurate copy. It must be pointed out that a cassette tape of any type is not a good long-term storage medium. Make the effort to deposit your recording at a responsible archive where a high-quality, open-reel copy is the archival standard.

Birds in the Hand

An article on documentation would not be complete without discussing the value of a specimen. The voucher specimen is still the most convincing hard evidence. When properly prepared, labeled, and curated, scientific specimens provide relatively permanent proof of a species' occurrence. In most cases, they can be identified with 100-percent certainty and are always available for re-examination. A voucher specimen is defined simply as a bird collected to provide evidence of an occurrence. Most modern scientific collectors, however, are relatively competent at field identification, and, although some rarities are still collected from the desire to abide by the voucher specimen concept, few are collected for the sole purpose of species identification. In other words, most bird specimens are no longer taken at random or because the bird could not be identified by the collector. Each specimen can provide a wealth of information unobtainable from most field observations or photographs: geographic origin, age, sex, molt, diet, and general physical condition, etc. Although few birders are also scientific collectors, birders and their acquaintances do often encounter dead or moribund birds. The bodies can be "salvaged" by delivery to a museum (see Jett l991). Occasionally, the carcass found is that of a rare species. Fairly recently, the first accepted U.S. records of White-collared

Swift (Streptoprocne zonaris) (Hardy and Clench 1982), Azure Gallinule (Porphyrula flavirostris) (Boyle et al. 1987), and Mottled Owl (Ciccaba virgata) (Lasley et al. 1988) were birds found dead. The swift and the gallinule were delivered to museums and prepared as specimens; the owl carcass was photographed (Texas Photo Record File, TPRF no.377), and the accompanying report is filed in the Texas Bird Records Committee files (TBRC no. 1988-18), both located at Texas A&M University. Countless other important state, provincial, and regional occurrences of rarities are based on specimens that were directly or indirectly salvaged by birders. Carcasses of very rare species, regardless of their condition, should be salvaged if at all possible and deposited at an appropriate museum. Museum personnel can make other types of preparations in addition to the standard study skin (e.g., spread-wing, fluid-preserved, or skeletal preparations) that will serve as voucher specimens for birds that are badly damaged or in an advanced state of decomposition.

Sick or injured birds of rare species are also found occasionally. In addition to taking these birds to local rehabilitation facilities for veterinary care, photographs and written details of the "find" should be obtained and submitted to appropriate RBCs and regional editors. Not all rehabilitation-center personnel are experts at field identification, nor do they necessarily photograph their unusual "patients" or deposit fatalities at a museum, so it is important to make all attempts to photograph the rarity and follow up on its fate. Rehabilitation centers should be encouraged to record information on dates and localities and to donate casualties to museums. One of the few well-documented Louisiana records of Golden Eagle (Aquila chrysaetos) was of a bird found injured and brought to the LSU Museum of Natural Science (LSUMNS). The bird was then turned over to a rehabilitation center. It was photographed during its convalescence in captivity and during release; details were submitted to the LBRC (Dittmann,in press). California's first Chuck- will's-widow (Caprimulgus carolinensis) was brought to a rehabilitation center; this bird subsequently died, and (fortunately) the specimen was deposited at the California Academy of Sciences (CAS no. 83955, Bailey 1989). In April 1986, the first White-chinned Petrel (Procellaria aequinoctialis) for the U.S. was found floundering in the surf at Bolivar Peninsula, Texas (full details to be published elsewhere). The bird was delivered to a rehabilitation center where it was photographed in the hand and "identified" as a Sooty Shear-water (Puffinus griseus). Unfortunately, the bird subsequently died and the specimen was discarded! It was not until photographs of the hand-held bird were submitted to the TBRC several years later that a correct identification was determined.

Many outstanding birds have been captured during banding activities (particularly at "vagrant traps" like Southeast Farallon Island), including the recent first U.S. records of Greenish Elaenia (Morgan and Feltner 1985) and Yucatan Vireo (Vireo magister) (Morgan et al. 1985), and the first Louisiana record of Hooded Oriole (Icterus cucullatus) (Cardiff et al. 1991). Banders should be prepared to photograph unusual species to support their identification. Occasionally, birds die during banding activities; net casualties should be salvaged as mentioned earlier. The only Golden-cheeked Warbler (Dendroica chrysoparia) record for the West Coast was a bird netted on Southeast Farallon Island, California (Lewis et al. 1974). The warbler, initially identified as a Black-throated Green (D. virens) and placed in a migration-study orientation chamber, died during the night; it is deposited at the California Academy of Sciences (CAS no. 68546).

Documenting Your Observation

A general definition of documentation is evidence submitted to some authority to support the occurrence of a species at a particular place and time. Evidence includes a written report, which has been based on field notes and sketches, and if available, photographs, tape recordings, or other evidence (e.g., feathers, pellets, casts of footprints, etc.). The occurrence may involve one or more birds observed at one locality at more or less the same time (e.g., flock of 16 Band-rumped Storm Petrels (Oceanodroma castro), 12 miles south of South Pass, Louisiana, on 17 July 1999). In other words, one record may involve several individual birds. Each bird, however, should be described in as much detail as was recorded during or soon after the observation. Although this may be somewhat taxing, especially on a rough pelagic trip, individual birds do vary. A greater contribution can be made by noting (or, better yet, photographing) this variation (e.g., patterns of wing molt on storm-petrels, cap and underwing patterns in Pterodroma).

A report is fairly easy to prepare when data can be transcribed directly from notes. The length of the report varies with degree of rarity, difficulty of identification, and amount of observation data. All reports should be submitted in RBC format to ensure that all the important aspects of the observation are included. Your name should appear on each page of the report and on any additional attachments (field notes, sketches, etc.). The report should be legible and written in your own words. Try to avoid using popular jargon, such as "the Pomarine Jaeger was barrelchested"; this sounds as if you have absorbed the description straight from a field guide or fellow birders. This is also a subjective statement; it does not tell us anything definitive about the jaeger's size, except that you thought it looked "barrelchested," whatever that means. It would be much more constructive to compare the jaeger's bulk and general shape to those of another bird present. Do not be afraid to describe features that are inconsistent with those currently accepted marks for species identification in fear that it may jeopardize the credibility of your identification. New information is constantly being discovered and existing dogma abandoned. In fact, what may be considered an anomalous feature or behavior at the time could help clinch the identification during subsequent analysis.

A report of a review-list species should include all the detailed information that was obtained during the observation, most notably a thorough description and comments on the elimination of similar species. The conditions surrounding the observation (e.g., duration, time of day, distance, weather and lighting conditions, optics used, etc.) are also important facts to include and have direct influence on the record. Your description of the rarity is likely to be much less detailed if the observation was very brief, the weather was inclement, or the bird was very distant. Duplicates of original data (field notes and field sketches) on which your report is based should be attached to your report. As with writing field notes, the sooner after the observation you prepare your report, the more thorough your report is likely to be.

Reports of lesser rarities may be somewhat more abbreviated than reports for review-list species but should contain the same general information as that in a RBC report. The report should be written using the same general format used in a RBC. The format should conform, for example, to that preferred by the regional ornithological society or American Birds editor. In Louisiana, the LSUMNS supplies 3 x 5-inch cards to observers to use in reporting Louisiana sightings (3 x

5 bird-observation card). The back of the card is available for the observer to write additional details, such as description, behavior and other important aspects of the observation. Although this report is abbreviated (mainly by space constraints) as compared to typical review-list species reports, the individual bird can be well described. These cards are submitted to the Central Southern Region editors of American Birds for possible inclusion in the seasonal reports, and then later returned and kept on file at LSUMNS.

Whenever possible, photographs and tape recordings should accompany all reports. If sending original slides and tapes, use certified mail. When submitting photographic documentation, always include a representative series of photographs (showing the bird in as many poses, angles, lighting conditions, etc., as possible). This may include all photographs of the bird. It is not necessary to submit photographs in which the bird's image is completely unrecognizable. Neatly label all slides with the species, date, complete locality, and the photographer's name. If you do not wish to submit your original slides or prints or risk mailing them, then you can have a set of high-quality duplicates made. Many RBCs are willing to do the duplication and return the original slides. In addition to RBCs, VIREO archives photographic documentation (Myers et al. 1984). For submission of an audio archive to a RBC, tape recordings (cassettes or reels) should be labeled (in addition to being introduced on the tape itself) with the same information as requested for photographs. For information on your local RBC or other regional RBCs and how to contact them, see Roberson (1990).

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